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Ranking RTJ golf trail courses: Cambrian Ridge is the leader in the clubhouse

If you move to Alabama and love golf, you are going to be drawn to the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail.

There's no escaping it. I came to Alabama from Wisconsin three years ago and have enjoyed playing at five of the state's 11 locations thus far.

With this year being the 20th anniversary of the Trail, I decided to rank from top to bottom the eight courses I've played at Capitol Hill, Cambrian Ridge, Oxmoor Valley, Highland Oaks and Grand National.

Courses were rated on conditions, design, staff, playability for the average golfer and, ultimately, how badly I wanted to come back.

1. Cambrian Ridge

The first time I came to Cambrian Ridge, I was in awe. The site and the routing of the Sherling/Canyon nines are simply beautiful. I also left my first round scratching my head. I thought this course is hard.

I hit tee shots that bounced off hills and into the woods. I hit fairways and the green

and then three-putted because I left myself in one of the quadrants of the green that's no man's land.

But when I left the course bruised by my score, I couldn't wait to try it again.

Each of the holes on the Sherling/Canyon presents unique choices.

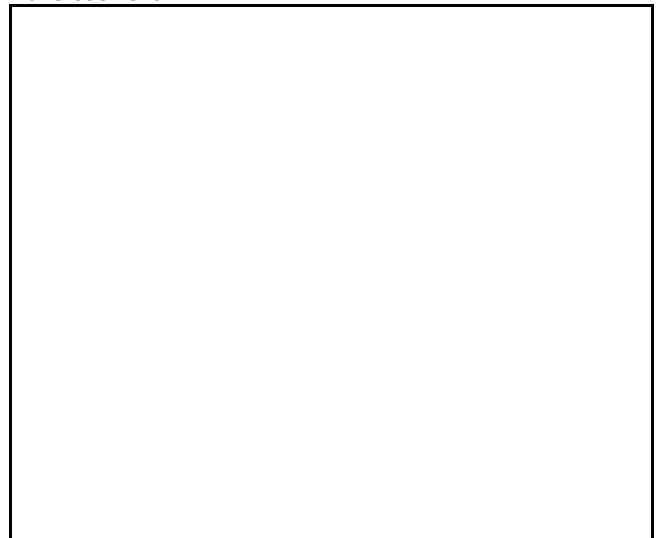
It's not an 18 where you take your driver and whack away. There are plenty of holes where a 175-to-200-yard tee shot aimed at the 150-yard marker in the center of the fairway is the play of choice. It may leave you a longer shot to the green, but a flat lie may give you a better shot for a birdie.

There are so many holes that I call my favorites.

On Sherling, the three-hole stretch on Nos. 3, 4 and 5 can make or break your nine.

The third hole is a 356-yard (white tees) par 4 from an elevated tee box to the

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valley below. The several-tiered, heavily bunkered green is back up to the right. It takes two good shots to be in position for a two-putt par.

The fourth hole is a 141-yard par 3 over water to an elongated green. Depending on the pin placement from right to left, you it could tee off with any one of four clubs. For me, from right to left it is 9-8-7-6-iron. The pin placement on the far left is the toughest with the water in play short, left and behind the pin.

The fifth hole ranks No. 5 on the Trail's Top 18 holes and is the No. 1 handicap on Sherling. It is a 367-yard, par 4 with water all along the left side and behind the hole. The tee shot is deceptive. You must decide how much of the water you want to bite off to leave yourself with the shortest iron into the green you can.

And, you'll need it. The green has a major drop-off toward the water, but to me the back left pin placement is the most difficult. There are not a lot of places to land the ball. Anything left rolls down the hill. Anything long rolls into the water. Even a center of the green shot leaves a difficult two putt.

On Canyon, the three-hole stretch that determines if my round is good or bad are Nos. 5, 6 and 7.

The fifth hole is a 330-yard par 4 dogleg to the left heading into a narrow-deep green guarded by a creek. The ideal tee shot leaves you 125 yards out with a flat lie

before the fairway heads downhill. The sixth hole is 366 yards with water to your right and a creek cutting across the fairway in front of you. The green is elevated to the right with the water in play.

The seventh hole is listed at 464 yards for a par 5 (but can measure as little as 425 yards from a lower tee box). It can be an easy birdie hole, but you can also walk off with a snowman wondering where the strokes disappeared on a green that chipping around and putting on can be diabolical.

Those are six great holes, and I haven't even mentioned both courses' No. 9s that are par 4s that play around the canyon to an elevated, connected multi-tiered green. Also, be sure to take an extra club or two. A 150-yard shot from the fairway plays likes it is 170.

These two nines bring you back. It is by far the top of my RTJ list. Even though Cambrian Ridge doesn't get the traffic some of the other sites get, this course is

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beautiful and challenging and well worth the trip.

2. Grand National: Links

On the Trail website, it states the cornerstone of the Grand National complex is the Links course, which is “without a single weakness.”

You read that and you think, really: “without a single weakness?”

But you play it, and it's true.

The course from start to finish is a golfer's joy ride.

Be prepared to think your way through, hit accurate tee shots, approaches and reach the proper tier of the putting surface. If you miss slightly at each shot along the journey, it's as if your trouble is compounded before finding the bottom of the cup. But if you execute, you are rewarded.

I happened to play the course for the first time this week without a guide of someone who had been there before. It's advantageous to do so. There are numerous tee shots and approaches that after you are through playing the hole for the first time, you think: “Oh, that's how you need to do it.”

But that's part of the allure of the course.

There is a definite strategy to all of the par 5s and a great mixture of shorter par 4s and longer, challenging par 4s to elevated

greens.

The par 3s are incredibly deceiving. Some appear easier than they are.

The most difficult is the 165-yard third hole. There's nowhere to miss. Water and marsh to the left and back with traps front and right. Nos. 9 and 16 are similar. Both are short par 3s (133 and 118), but with long greens so the correct club selection is vital. Also, on the Trail website it mentions subtle breaks ... believe it. You will be shaking your head on a few near misses before you are done.

Par 4s that definitely will test your game: 384-yard No. 4, 372-yard No. 14 and the 402-yard finishing 18th hole. The 18th is considered one of the strongest finishing holes on the Trail. You must drive a corner of the lake, keep it inside the fairway traps and hit a long approach to a difficult pedestal green. You need long approaches over a marsh on the fourth hole and with pot bunkers and trouble all around 14.

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But what I liked about the Links is it also has short, decision-making par 4s. These are ones where you might play them and think of a different way to do it if it didn't work the first time.

On the 299-yard eighth you need a 180- to 200-yard tee shot that avoids the marsh and three huge bunkers. Then you need a wedge where you can't go short, left, right or long. No problem, right?

The 326-yard 10th hole is similar with the need for a 200-yard tee shot, but the rolling green on the approach is where difficulty lies.

The 343-yard 13th hole is the one where I would have played it differently than what I did. I aimed for the 150-yard marker and had a 160-yard shot going into the green. I then realized I could have hit considerably more club over the traps and to the right of the marsh for a more reasonable 110- to 120-yard shot into a difficult green. But that was difficult to see from the tee box.

Two of the par 5s have considerable character. The 460-yard sixth is short but takes planning to negotiate a large marsh before the green and give you the shortest iron approach.

The 493-yard 12th is similar in that you really have to plan and execute so you have the club in your hand that you want to attack the green that anywhere you miss is definitely trouble.

OK, OK ... if there is a weakness, it's that

some of the drives to next holes are long and confusing.

Also, there are several long walks from the cart to the greens and to the tee boxes from the cart paths.

But those are only minor annoyances.

The reason the Links ranks ahead of the No. 3 Judge is simple. The challenge is there. But on some holes, there is more forgiveness for a slightly off-line or mishit tee shot or approach than there is at The Judge. You will get tested, but your scorecard might look better in the end.

3. Capitol Hill: Judge

When I first moved here, golfers talked about the Judge in reverent tones. Many had only played the course once to try it out and that was enough for them.

It was too difficult. There's too much water. You lose too many balls. You feel like you've been beaten up by the time you get

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done. And, all those things are true. But I've grown to love it.

Most golfers' hearts beat faster on the first tee, and very few can compare to the Trail's signature hole with downtown Montgomery off in the distance and a narrowing fairway below and water all along the right side.

A good or bad hole here can set the tone for your entire round. And, the fun is just beginning.

The second hole is a short par 4 with a tree in the middle of the fairway. Do you go to the left of the tree? Do you send it over the water and try to hook around the other side?

One time our group was waiting to tee off on No. 3. The group ahead of us was taking a surprisingly long amount of the time on the green. It didn't take us long to figure out why.

It's a seemingly benign 129-yard par 3 (from the white tees). Our group teed off, and one of my friends from Georgia left his tee shot 12 feet right of the back left pin placement.

His birdie putt slid by the hole a few inches to the right and a couple of feet past. The ball turned around, did a horseshoe and just missed the hole on the other side on the way back ... then rolled back past his feet. Now he had a 14-foot putt for par. He four-putted the green and was not the same the rest of the day. His confidence

was shot.

You don't know what is going to happen from hole to hole and each one is different and challenging.

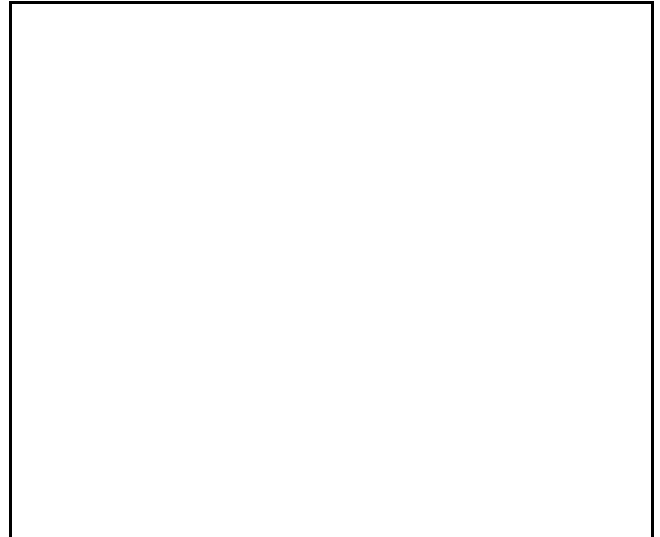
But that's part of the joy. Just keep battling. Try to make the best decisions and execute what you decided to do to the best of your ability. When good things happen, you feel vindicated. When bad things happen, you just try to minimize the damage.

Nearly every friend and relative I've had come visit, I've taken to the Judge. Some like it. Some don't. In May, we hooked up with a twosome from Michigan that was playing the Judge for the first time.

He said he was a 10-12 handicap and was looking forward to the course. He wanted to play the orange tees, and I persuaded him that he would have enough challenge from the whites the first time.

He finally agreed. He lost a dozen or more

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balls and limped home with a score of 115. It's a course where good shots don't necessarily get rewarded and poor shots can be penalized severely.

Like the course states before teeing off, "Prepare to be Judged" because your golf game certainly will receive a thorough examination before you are through.

4. Capitol Hill: Senator

The Senator used to be my favorite course at Capitol Hill but slipped to second place behind the Judge, though I still enjoy it. The two courses are so dramatically different.

The Senator is basically void of trees and requires a lot of target lines on tee shots that come with experience. Once I was playing with an LPGA player prior to the tournament and asked her where she lined up her tee shot on No. 9.

She said: "The far right flag of the bleachers." I said most of the time when I play here there are no bleachers behind the ninth green. You try to shave distances and get flat lies in the fairways.

That will enable you to have iron shots into the proper quadrant of the greens. If you do that, you can make some birdies and two-putt pars. If you are unable to hit greens or are not in the proper spot on the green, strokes can add up quickly.

One of the complaints I hear from other golfers about the Senator is losing balls that are just off the fairway or green. And, that

can happen. Sometimes balls just sit down in the rough, and if you don't have a target line as to where it was headed, you could be in trouble locating it.

One of the things I don't like is that often the holes start to look the same.

I can't say there is one hole I look forward to playing like I do at Cambrian Ridge or the Judge.

One hole I don't look forward to playing is No. 17.

You step to the tee box and a song comes to your head ... "One of these things just doesn't belong ..."

The 456-yard par 5 criss-crossing a ravine is unlike every other hole. It is difficult. It is challenging and requires thought on how to attack it, but usually when I take people to play there, they get to the tee box and go: "Huh?" It doesn't fit the rest of the course you've been playing for a few hours.

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5. Oxmoor: Ridge

One of things I liked about Ridge course: the shade. Playing at Capitol Hill in the heat of the summer there is little cover from Alabama heat, humidity and sunshine.

But the Ridge provides heavy tree cover and breezes felt from various elevation changes.

Last month, one of the assistant pros said many people feel it is difficult the first time they play it. He said part of the reason is because they are not taking into account all of the elevated greens, a Robert Trent Jones design hallmark.

He said on nearly every hole, you will need to take an extra half-club or club for the proper distances. The first hole we played, I followed his advice. We were 150 yards out and instead of a 7-iron, I selected a 6 and I was pin high. If I had used the 7, I would have likely been in the trap or bounding down the hill near the green.

A negative about the trees and the hills is the trees and hills. Tee shots just off-line can turn disastrous with a bounce down the hill or into the woods. Sticking to the fairways is always essential, but an errant shot here can result in lost balls, sometimes where you don't expect to lose them, or more trouble in hitting a tree in trying to get back to the fairway.

Two holes that I like are the par-5 506-yard third where the green is buttressed by a shelf of exposed shale rock (where I was

told that often many shots to the green are long and have ricocheted back to the green) and the 543-yard, par-5 18th that takes an exacting approach for a shot at birdie.

6. Capitol Hill: Legislator

Many friends I know love the Legislator. It's their favorite course at Capitol Hill. It's not one of mine. Not by a long shot.

The course description says it is a more traditional course played among the pine trees. That holds up for only a few holes. There are probably only two holes on the 18 that I even enjoy playing – No. 4, a 391-yard par 4 that is the course's offering for the top 18 holes on the Trail, and No. 11, a 148-yard par 3 over a swamp.

There are many more that I dislike. The 343-yard, par-4 15th hole is bad from the start. It is a tee off, sort of sideways, off a cliff. Then, you hit up to a poorly constructed green that isn't even fair.

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One of the things I mentioned about the Senator is that No. 17 seemed out of place. The Legislator seems like several different courses pieced together as one.

Holes No. 1 through No. 5 have a more traditional, North Carolina pine forest feel.

Then, Nos. 6 and 7 give you a break from that. No. 8 is back in the pine forest. No. 9 feels like we just had this much land before we got back to the clubhouse so deal with it.

Nos. 10-15 look like a cross-pollination of the North Carolina pine feel and the Judge. And, Nos. 16-18 look like Senator wannabee holes.

I don't ever wanting to play the Legislator. If the Judge and Senator are booked and the Legislator is my option, I'll stay home.

7. Grand National: Lake

I had heard a lot about the Lake Course and was looking forward to playing it, but the experience wasn't good. My partner and I were getting ready to tee off on the first hole and we didn't even know where to go.

I hit a horrible tee shot to the left over the trap, and as I was looking for my ball the course marshal drove by and said: "You must have played here a lot because you sure know how to play this one."

I had no idea what he was talking about.

Being in the rough on the other side of a sand trap heading into a water-guarded green is not my idea of a good shot. I later looked on the course map that showed fairway beyond the trap that might be a good spot. There was no fairway there that day.

We played a few more holes and found spotty, uneven greens. The delineation from the edges of the fairway and rough were hard to determine. Anything landing just short of the greens wouldn't bounce on. Anything landing on the greens would bounce like it had hit cement and roll off the green. That wasn't my idea of fun.

This was just after the course re-opened in September 2011 following a renovation.

With that as a back drop, it was hard to get a true feel. I did enjoy a few holes, including the 447-yard, par-5 seventh hole, but there were not many that left me wanting for more.

We got to the signature hole, the 160-yard,

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par 3 to the island green in the middle of the lake. It is beautiful but our problems ensued. Both of us hit the green. The balls, however, took majestic bounces to the other side. The green was rock hard. We kept trying for the “fun” of it. Each shot met the same result. A green on a narrow sliver of land should hold a shot from a 6- or 7-iron.

The conditions likely have changed and maybe we caught the course on a bad day, but it wasn't worth the trip, and there were not a lot of holes beckoning me to come back.

8. Highland Oaks

Capitol Hill Golf Director Mike Beverly told me that each Trail spot faces its own unique challenges and that Capitol Hill makes more money on travel packages than any other trail location, while Dothan only makes 5 percent of its income on travel packages.

It's not hard to figure out why. Word must get around.

Highland Oaks does not hold itself to the same standards of the four other locations I've visited.

The others resemble going to an exclusive club, while Dothan feels like beating the ball around with your buddies while downing a few cold ones at the city municipal. It's a night-and-day difference.

Driving up to the clubhouse, there's no one

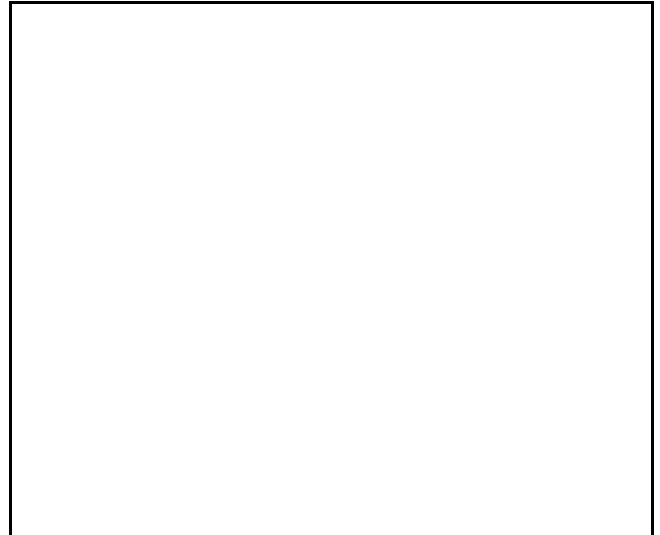
to take your clubs. You are supposed to stop in the middle of the road and put your clubs on the bag drop with a sign stating they are not responsible for clubs being stolen. You are stopping on a road. Anyone could drive up and take their pick.

You go to the clubhouse and staff members barely notice you. It's like they think you have been there before when you had not. We had to ask several people where to go to even find the first tee. At every other location I've been to one of the first questions asked is: “Have you been here before?”

On a Saturday, there was one marshal at the first tee. He didn't ask to see our receipts and waved us off, which again is procedure at every other Trail location I've played. That's usually the same time when the marshal welcomes you, tells you the pin location and answers any question you might have.

We never saw the marshal again even though the group in front of us was slowing

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us and three groups behind us. On each par 3, we had three groups on the same hole. The front nine took two and a half hours while the slow group let us play through on No. 10. The second nine took an hour and a half, which a marshal could have facilitated on the third hole of the first nine.

You would think this would be an issue on a day when one of the three nines (Magnolia) was closed.

The first six holes on the Highlands Course are tough. They are long with long approaches to difficult greens. The third hole, a 414-yard par 4 over and around water to a narrow elevated green is about as tough as it comes. But that wasn't the issue. Hard courses are what Trail players want to play.

But we called this day "Sadistic Saturday." Of the first six holes, five pin placements were on the absolute edges of the greens. They were impossible for even the best golfers to have legitimate shots at approaching the holes. The greens were in poor shape, shaggy and slow. They reminded me of Lagoon Park in Montgomery from a few years ago. I have never played greens at an RTJ course that bad.

But it wasn't just that. There were other basic problems.

Many of the tee boxes were brown or beaten. The tee box on the par-3 fourth hole on the Marshwood nine was the worst

tee box I've ever seen at a course of this supposed caliber.

When approaching the par-5 ninth on the Highlands Course, we couldn't find our elevated tee box from the cart path. We had to drive back and forth and walk all over the place to locate it.

The 18th hole of Senator addresses this same problem by putting a colored peg near the cart path where you can expect to walk across to find your tee box.

Also, unlike any other RTJ course played, carts were allowed basically everywhere.

It felt awkward at times driving in the paths of people that went before us because of all the damage the course was taking. There were tire tracks and brown patches at most holes and near many greens.

When my friends visit from the Midwest, I like to take them to good courses. The quality here is not even close to the other Trail spots I've visited. There's no reason

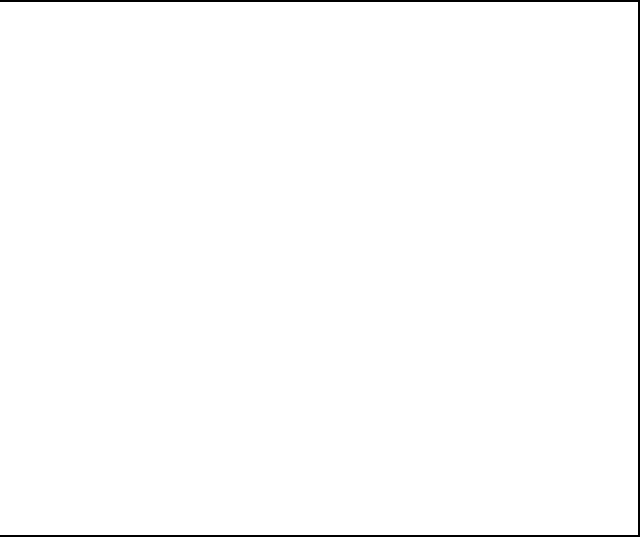
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